

WORK ENGAGEMENT AT THE SOUTH AFRICAN ROAD ACCIDENT FUND: THE ROLE OF FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

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Abstract

Organisational success and sustainability are achieved through ensuring that employees remain motivated and engaged in the pursuit of organisational objectives. This includes employees in the South African public sector which is mandated with ensuring quality service delivery to citizens. However, public sector performance has found to be lacking, which, in part, has been attributed to a lack of engagement. This makes it important to identify and leverage the factors that do have a positive influence on employee engagement, and ultimately on their performance. The purpose of this study was to examine work engagement

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at a public sector entity, this being the South African Road Accident Fund (RAF). As with many other organisations, the RAF has introduced flexible working arrangements (FWAs). The study thus further sought to explore the role played by FWAs as an engagement factor.

A quantitative and survey-based study was conducted among 410 employees of the RAF at all job levels and working in various regions across South Africa. The findings suggest that employees experienced neutrality or moderate levels of engagement. In relation to the factors promoting engagement, more positive experiences were reported in relation to work-life balance, employee wellbeing and employee involvement. Significant relationships were determined between engagement levels and all the factors considered in this study. Finally, in terms of FWAs, flexibility of time of work emerged as more important than place of work.

This study contributes towards the field of knowledge and practice as it relates to the construct of employee engagement, more particularly in the public sector.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The South African Road Accident Fund (RAF) provides compulsory insurance cover for liability or damages caused by traffic accidents on South African roads (Road Accident Fund, n.d.). The RAF forms part of the South African public sector and the sole mandate of this sector is to render services to the public. Unlike the private sector there is no organisational profit motive linked to job performance in the public sector (Ghuman, 2016). Organisational performance, and hence employee performance, is determined by the effective and efficient delivery of public services to citizens. However, the South African public sector and its employees receive ongoing criticism in this regard (Martins & Ledimo, 2016).

There are several factors that could contribute towards poor service delivery in the public sector with one of these being employee performance (Maake et al., 2024). In turn, employee performance in this

sector is influenced by many factors including the turbulence of regime changes, political instability and patronage, bureaucratic corruption and a lack of strategic leadership (De Villiers et al, 2023). These phenomena and others could negatively influence the enthusiasm and work engagement levels of public sector employees. At the same time there is an expectation that these employees possess inherent motivation to act in the best interest of citizens (Ngwane & Dachapalli, 2022) and demonstrate strong work engagement through viewing their work as a “calling” (Ngwane & Dachapalli, 2022). However, ongoing evidence of poor service delivery suggests that this is not the case with all employees.

Work engagement is described as a positive, satisfying state of mind, with engaged employees demonstrating energy, absorption and dedication when performing their jobs (Joubert & Roodt, 2019). Engaged employees are willing to invest time and effort in their work (Kahn & Heapy, 2014) and engagement thus plays an important role in driving employee levels of motivation (Taghavi, 2019). Work engagement is linked to positive employee behaviours such as optimum performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), increased commitment (Wu & Wu, 2019), lower levels of absenteeism (Peker et al., 2018), constructive relationship building, (Osborne & Hammoud, 2017), innovation (Hodder & Houghton, 2020), and loyalty (Saks, 2022). In turn, these behaviours are associated with positive organisational outcomes including improved productivity and quality of work (Rapid, 2017).

According to the Gallup “State of the Global Workplace” report (2024), global work engagement declined in 2023. However, the report also indicates that South Africa’s work engagement is estimated at 29% which surpasses the global average by 6%. At the same time the rate of actively disengaged employees in South Africa, these being employees who are dissatisfied with their current jobs and actively seeking new employment, has decreased to 11.7%, again below the global average of 15%. This holds positive implications for South African organisations as high levels of engagement boost productivity, improve retention, foster innovation and enhance customer service (Thorne, 2024).

There are several factors that contribute towards work engagement. This study considered the influence of work-life balance, employee wellbeing, leadership, reward and recognition, employee involvement, effective communication, and learning and development. Understanding that the COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst for change in workplace practices, it was deemed important to also consider the role of flexible working arrangements (FWAs).

The Gallup (2024) study did not provide evidence as to whether there was a difference in the levels of engagement between public and private sector employees. For this reason, the current study sought to determine the levels of engagement of employees in a public sector entity, this being the South African RAF, as well as identify the influence of certain factors on levels of engagement, including the role played by FWAs.

1.2. Problem Statement

The public sector is mandated to ensure the effective and efficient provision of public services to citizens. However, levels of service delivery in South Africa have been found to be lacking which suggests that not all public sector employees are performing at the expected levels. One factors that can influence employee performance is work engagement. While recent Gallup (2024) statistics identified engagement levels as higher than the global average, South Africa is ranked low (60th out of 63 countries) in terms of competitiveness (IMD World Competitiveness Ranking, 2023). One of the indicators measured in this ranking is government efficiency, with service delivery being highlighted as a challenge for South Africa.

The South African RAF plays a critical role in public sector service delivery through alleviating the financial burden experienced by accident victims and ensuring that they received the necessary medical treatment, rehabilitation and compensation. At RAF signs and symptoms suggestive of low levels of engagement (Govindarajo et al, 2014) were identified, including a high absenteeism rate, late coming and high staff turnover. It is against this backdrop that this study sought to explore engagement as well as the factors promoting work engagement among employees at the South African RAF. For this study these factors were identified as work-life balance, employee wellbeing, leadership, reward and recognition, employee involvement, effective communication, and learning and development. Further, the RAF had, during the COVID-19 pandemic, implemented FWAs, these being flexitime, telecommuting and hybrid work. The study further sought to explore the influence of these FWAs.

It is hoped that that this study will assist RAF managers and others within the South African public sector to better promote the conditions that foster engagement among employees. This may assist in stimulating the type of behaviours, including motivation, that positively influence employee performance. This should, in turn, contribute towards effective and efficient service delivery.

1.3. Research objectives

The primary objective of this paper was to examine work engagement among South African RAF employees. Secondary objectives were to determine the levels of work engagement of these employees, the factors that contribute towards their engagement and identify whether these factors had an influence on their engagement levels.

This paper comprises a literature review in which work engagement is explored, as well as factors that contribute towards work engagement. This includes consideration of some previous studies examining the relationship between these variables. The research methodology adopted in fulfilment of the study objectives is presented, including details on the measuring instruments, population, sampling technique and data collection process. Thereafter the results of the study are presented, followed by managerial implications, recommendations and the limitations of the study.

2. Literature Review

The literature review focuses on the work engagement construct and further examines the factors identified as potentially contributing towards engagement in this study.

2.1. Work engagement

Kahn (1990), regarded as a pioneer of work engagement, defined it as a state in which an employee is simultaneously physically, emotionally and cognitively present in their work role (Cooke et al., 2019). Through this alignment of the individual with their work tasks they can achieve desired results. Further, Kahn (1990) contended that engaged employees are actively involved in and show genuine concern for their employing organisation, its leaders and working conditions.

The terms “work engagement” and “employee engagement” are frequently used interchangeably. However, Schaufeli (2013) strikes a distinction between the two, referring to work engagement as the employee’s relationship with his or her work, and employee engagement as including the employee’s relationship with the organisation. Schaufeli (2013) further asserts that including the relationship with the organisation blurs the distinction between engagement and other constructs such as organisational commitment and extra-role behaviour. In this study reference is made to work engagement, which is defined as “a positive, fulfilling, work related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p.74).

Vigour relates to an employee’s ability to show high levels of energy and mental resilience while working and the willingness to invest effort, and persistence even when facing challenges. The opposite of vigour is exhaustion, which describes employee experiences of fatigue and tension. Vigour aligns with the concept of intrinsic motivation and is seen to energise and direct goal-oriented behaviour (Nienaber & Martins, 2016).

Dedication represents the extent to which an employee identifies with his or her work role and represents an emotional connection with and involvement therein (Bakker et al., 2008; Geldenhuys et al., 2014; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Dedicated employees experience meaningfulness in their work and demonstrate enthusiasm to the organisation. This contrasts with cynicism, which is characterised by a loss of interest in work or attaching little meaning thereto (Gonzalez-Roma et al., 2006). Dedication can be likened to the notion of job commitment.

Absorption relates to the ability of employees to concentrate deeply and willingly immerse themselves in their work, without noticing the passing of time (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014; Mmako & Schultz, 2016; Vermeulen & Scheepers, 2020). This focus and engrossment represents a cognitive connection with work and aligns with the concept of “flow” (Nienaber & Martins, 2016). The absence of absorption could be inefficacy, although absorption is not seen to comprise a continuum as with

vigour and dedication. Absorption has been found to correlate highly with vigour which suggests that high levels of absorption require high levels of energy and vice versa (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

Work engagement can be measured using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-17), developed by Schaufeli et al in 2002 (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). The UWES-17 is founded on the job-demands (JDR) theory and based on the definition of work engagement as a combination of vigour, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli, 2013) as described above. It should be noted that part of the rationale behind developing the UWES-17 was to promote the scientific study of human strength and optimal functioning (positive psychology) (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

In measuring work engagement, Gallup (2013) classifies engagement into three categories: employees are either engaged, not engaged, or actively disengaged. Engaged employees are those who approach their work with enthusiasm and demonstrate commitment and connection to their employing organisation. These employees contribute towards creating a positive work environment and take the lead in driving organisational success (Al Mehrzi & Singh, 2016; Gallup, 2013). In contrast are employees who are not engaged in their work. These disinterested or unenthusiastic individuals may be present, but not putting time and effort into their work due to a lack of emotional connection (Rheem, 2017). Employees who are not engaged can cost the organisation time and money due to their lack of involvement, greater chance of being absent, contribution to a negative work culture and unsatisfactory service delivery (Gallup, 2013; Dash, 2013). Finally, there are the actively disengaged employees. These employees are dissatisfied and critical of colleagues, management and ongoing projects (Bhuvanaiah & Raya, 2014), They may even be actively seeking alternative career opportunities (Shuck & Rose, 2013). Due to their negative attitudes and undesirable behaviours, actively disengaged employees can have a detrimental effect on team morale, productivity, and job satisfaction (Gallup, 2013).

Work engagement has been found to be an important determinant of organisational success. This is because engaged employees are more motivated and dedicated to their work and demonstrate positive attitudes, commitment and a willingness to contribute to higher levels of productivity (Gallup, 2020). They also demonstrate increased creativity and innovation (Sharma & Nambudiri, 2020), and better customer service (Menguc et al., 2013). Engaged employees also serve as better organisational representatives (Reserva, 2021) and are more likely to recommend the organisation as an outstanding place to work (Gallup, 2020). Engaged employees experience better health and wellbeing than those that are disengaged (Graca et al., 2019). Retention and lower absenteeism are further benefits, with engaged employees demonstrating greater loyalty to their employer (Deloitte, 2016) and investment in the success of their teams (Al Maktoum, 2015). With this knowledge it is important to understand the factors that influence work engagement.

2.2. Factors promoting work engagement

As indicated, work engagement leads to a variety of positive individual outcomes that facilitate the achievement of organisational objectives. However, improving work engagement requires a clear understanding of the determinants thereof as it is within these variables that employers may be able to exert some influence. While these variables are many and varied, for the purposes of this study the following were explored: work-life balance, employee wellbeing, leadership, reward and recognition, employee involvement, effective communication, learning and development, and FWAs.

Work-life balance, which is seen as the ability to manage both work and family responsibilities, has emerged as a vital determinant of work engagement (Peeters & Demerouti, 2014; Benito-Osario et al., 2015). Due to factors such as technological advances, globalisation, demographic and workplace changes, (Allen et al., 2013; Berg et al., 2014), there is an increased focus on work-life balance. Employees who experience work-life balance are more hopeful, self-confident, supportive, and attached to the organisation, which, in turn, leads to increased engagement levels (Iqbal et al., 2017). Work-life balance is also necessary to ensure that personal resources are not depleted by work demands as highlighted in the JDR model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). This implies that when employees are struggling with work-life balance, employers need to take the initiative in creating an environment that facilitates balance. This can be achieved through the introduction of family-friendly policies and practices including elder- and childcare facilities and through relevant time-off policies (Berg et al., 2014; Allen et al., 2013). Work-life balance is also promoted through the introduction of FWAs (Chen & Fulmer, 2017). These FWAs typically include remote work, hybrid work, a four-day workweek, flexitime, flexiplace, compressed workweek, reduced work hours or offering work on a part-time basis.

A further determinant of engagement is employee wellbeing. If employers are to promote productivity through higher levels of engagement, prioritising the wellbeing of employees is non-negotiable (Misselbrook, 2014). This is because employees who are mentally, physically, and emotionally healthy are more likely to be engaged. Therefore, if employers demonstrate a commitment to wellbeing, employees will feel cared for. In this way they will be better able to bring their full selves to work, use discretionary efforts, and go above and beyond what is required of them. A global study by Virgin Pulse (2023) indicated that 85% of the organisations surveyed highlighted the importance of wellness programmes in enhancing engagement levels.

Saks (2022) identifies leadership as a key driver of work engagement. While leaders demonstrate different leadership styles, transformational leaders have been found to exert a positive influence on work engagement (Sun & Henderson, 2017). This may be because a transformational approach is values-based, inspirational, morale building and one that prioritises employee growth and development – all elements that should stimulate engagement. Furthermore, transformational leaders

exert a positive influence on how employees view their working environment and this leads to increased engagement (Breevaart et al., 2014).

Reward and recognition are also important in promoting work engagement (Bussin & Toerien, 2015). Rewards constitute the compensation and incentives that employees receive in return for services rendered while recognition entails acknowledgement for performance-related achievements. Reward and recognition can be financial, including salaries, raises, bonuses, allowances, and wage incentives, or non-financial, including coaching, mentoring, career advancement opportunities, employee development programmes, performance feedback, and FWAs (Sidhu & Nizam, 2020; Hulkko-Nyman et al., 2014). Through suitable reward and recognition programmes, organisations demonstrate to employees that they are valued and appreciated. This increases their sense of belonging and pride, resulting in improved engagement levels. In the new world of work authors, including Hansen (2023) and Imandin et al (2015), contend that personalised reward and recognition programmes are vital for enhancing engagement levels as they assist in improving the employee experience, relationships, engagement, and happiness at work. In turn this results in greater positive organisational outcomes.

Authors including Mapi (2021), Gwambe (2020), and Van Wyk (2019) highlight employee involvement as a determinant of work engagement. Employee involvement refers to the practice of empowering employees through involving them in managerial decision-making and improvement initiatives (Obiekwe et al., 2019). These collaborative opportunities for involvement ensure mutual accountability for the overall success of the organisation (Jurburg et al., 2017). Doran (2013) asserts that involved employees are usually engaged due to their acceptance of the values, vision, mission, and objectives of the organisation through their sense of acknowledgement, belonging, and responsibility.

A further factor that contributes to work engagement is that of effective communication. Effective communication lays a strong foundation for achieving organisational objectives as it contributes to increased productivity, involvement, innovation, motivation, and engagement (Vora & Patra, 2017). Lolli (2013) maintains that effective communication is essential in engaging employees due to its potential to influence attitudes, knowledge, and behaviour. However, communicating effectively with employees is one of the biggest challenges facing organisations. Mishra et al. (2014) claim that part of this challenge lies in creating the type of environment in which employees feel free to voice their views and opinions.

Learning and development can be a powerful tool for enhancing engagement. Employees who want to grow in their careers will be motivated and engaged if they are provided with opportunities to gain new competences and knowledge in line with their developmental goals. Caplan (2014) suggests that learning and development opportunities should address both present and future job demands by predicting, reviewing, and modifying existing competency sets. If organisations prioritise learning and

development initiatives it leads to positive employee work behaviours which, in turn, leads to improved organisational performance and other desired outcomes. Importantly, Anitha (2014) asserts that organisations should encourage employees to participate in learning and development initiatives because it improves confidence which is then reflected in their performance, motivation, and engagement.

A final consideration is that of FWAs. The COVID-19 pandemic saw an acceleration of digitalisation processes and remote working arrangements. This has led to FWAs now being typical in many sectors (Timsal & Awais, 2016) and facilitated by technological advancements, streamlined workforces, and dynamic market conditions (Ertas, 2015). Mehta (2021) provides examples of FWAs including telecommuting, part-time work, hybrid work, job sharing, flexitime, and a compressed work week. FWAs have been positively linked to desired work-related attitudes such as productivity, commitment, self-goal setting, job satisfaction, self-observation and engagement, and negatively to employee turnover (Inuwa, 2016; Chen & Fulmer, 2017). It is believed that through implementing FWAs organisations enable employees to achieve a better work-life balance and that this can contribute to higher levels of engagement.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research approach and design

A positivistic research paradigm and quantitative research approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) were employed in this study to determine the levels of and identify the factors that contribute towards the work engagement of employees of the South African RAF. Further, the study adopted a descriptive and correlational design in seeking to describe and explain the variables of interests and to explore for a relationship between these variables. Data were gathered electronically via a self-administered survey questionnaire.

3.2 Measuring instruments

Two scales were deployed in this study. The first of these was the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-17) as a measure of work engagement. The second was a scale developed by the researcher to determine the factors seen to promote work engagement.

The UWES-17 is a self-report measure that has been found to demonstrate internal consistency within the South African context, with alpha coefficients ranging between 0.78 and 0.89 as per Storm and Rothman (2003). The scale measures the three attributes of work engagement of vigour (6 items), dedication (5 items) and absorption (6 items). Scale items were accompanied by five-point Likert-type response scales ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). In this study reliability

coefficients were calculated for the three attributes as follows: vigour = 0.80, dedication = 0.87 and absorption = 0.79. The internal reliability of the scale was thus determined to be good to excellent as per the recommendations of Picardi and Masick (2014).

In determining the factors influencing work engagement, a scale was developed based on the work of Schaufeli et al. (2002), Armstrong (2014), Anitha (2014) and Mkheimer (2018). The factors included for consideration in this study related to employee experiences of work-life balance, employee wellbeing, leadership, reward and recognition, employee involvement, effective communication, learning and development, and FWAs. The items developed were accompanied by five-point Likert-type response scales. The scale comprised 27 items, with three items per factor, apart from FWAs, for which there were six items. As a newly constructed scale reliability coefficients were calculated for each factor. These ranged between 0.68 and 0.82, thus demonstrating fair to excellent internal reliability (Picardi and Masick, 2014).

3.3 Population, sample and data collection

The population for this study comprised all permanent employees of the South African RAF (N=2594). These employees worked in different business units, including Human Capital, Finance, ICT, Operations, Strategy, Risk and Compliance and Marketing and Communication. They were stationed in various regions across South Africa including Centurion, Pretoria, Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town and East London. These employees represented all job levels as follows: 1 to 13 (bargaining unit), 14 to 16 (Management), 17 to 18 (Senior Management) and 19 to 23 (Executive level).

A non-probability and convenience sampling technique was adopted as respondents could decide for themselves whether to participate in the survey. Once the necessary permissions had been granted, a link to the survey, which was administered on the QuestionPro platform, was forwarded via email to all employees. A final sample of 410 was achieved, this representing a 16% response rate which is considered adequate for generalising the findings to the target population.

Most of the respondents (47%) were between the ages of 35 and 44 years, female (58%) and of black ethnicity (82%). Of the respondents (42%) had worked at the RAF between six and ten years and 63% came from the Gauteng region. Sixty percent represented the Operations business unit, and 76% were employed at job grade levels 1 to 13. This means that most of the respondents were employees who had no direct reports, unlike the other grade levels, who represent employees holding leadership positions. This should be borne in mind in interpreting and generalizing the findings of this study, as the engagement experiences of operational employees who form part of the bargaining unit may differ from those of those holding leadership positions.

Understanding that FWAs were highlighted in this study as possibly influencing engagement, it was important to consider representation in terms of this variable. In their responses approximately 40% of

the respondents indicated that they had made use of FWAs in the preceding year. These respondents further indicated that 68% had made use of flexitime, 24% had utilised telecommuting and 20% had utilised a hybrid arrangement.

4. Ethics

All ethical protocols were observed. The researchers obtained ethics clearance from the university at which the study was conducted (H23-BES-HRM-005) prior to commencing with data collection. No personal or identifying information was collected from the respondents as part of the survey. In addition, the necessary institutional permission was sought and obtained from the relevant RAF gatekeeper.

5. Results and Findings

In this study data were collected via an electronically administered survey. The data were returned in an aggregated form for analysis and reporting purposes making use of the STATISTICA analytics software package.

Employee experiences of work engagement and the factors that influence engagement

In this study the UWES-17 was used to determine employee experiences of work engagement and a scale was developed to determine the factors that could exert an influence on work engagement. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted for the scale measuring the factors influencing engagement as it was a newly developed scale based on a review of relevant literature. Table 1 presents the eigenvalues for this scale and associated percentage of total variance.

Table 1: EFA Eigenvalues for the factors influencing work engagement

| Factor | Eigenvalues | % Total Variance explained |
|-------------------------------|-------------|----------------------------|
| Work-Life Balance | 1,978 | 65,93 |
| Employee Wellbeing | 1,945 | 64,82 |
| Leadership | 2,118 | 70,60 |
| Reward and recognition | 1.862 | 62.05 |
| Employee Involvement | 2,167 | 72, 23 |
| Effective Communication | 2.206 | 73.53 |
| Learning and Development | 1.934 | 64.48 |
| Workplace Flexibility (TIME) | 2.480 | 41.33 |
| Workplace Flexibility (PLACE) | 1.355 | 22.58 |

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The EFA revealed unidimensional factor structures for almost all factors, and hence the original labels attributed to these factors were retained. The only exception was for the six items measuring FWA which were found to comprise two factors. In considering the three items that loaded on each of these factors, the two FWAs factors were renamed “flexitime” and “flexiplace”. This was because three of the items were identified as dealing with the “when” of work (flexitime) and the other three with the “where” of work (flexiplace). For purposes of further analysis FWAs was seen as comprising these two factors. With this understanding, Table 2 provides the mean scores and standard deviations describing employee engagement experiences.

Table 2: Employee experiences of work engagement and work engagement factors

| Factor | Items | Response rate | Mean score | SD |
|--------------------------------|-------|---------------|------------|------|
| UWES-17 scale | | | | |
| Vigour | 6 | 399 | 3,43 | 0,73 |
| Dedication | 5 | 405 | 3,57 | 0,87 |
| Absorption | 6 | 399 | 3,43 | 0,72 |
| Work engagement factors | | | | |
| Work-Life Balance | 3 | 411 | 4,11 | 0,78 |
| Employee Wellbeing | 3 | 410 | 3,58 | 0,86 |
| Leadership | 3 | 406 | 3,40 | 0,96 |
| Reward and Recognition | 3 | 400 | 3,32 | 0,92 |
| Employee Involvement | 3 | 406 | 3,78 | 0,87 |
| Effective Communication | 3 | 401 | 3,12 | 0,93 |
| Learning and Development | 3 | 403 | 3,41 | 0,88 |
| FWA Flexitime | 3 | 408 | 3,12 | 0,93 |
| FWA Flexiplace | 3 | 405 | 3,28 | 1,06 |

In interpreting the level of work engagement and experiences of engagement factors, the following scoring key was used: less than 1.5 (very low), between 1.5 and 2.5 (low), between 2.5 and 3.5 (moderate), between 3.5 and 4.5 (high), and above 4.5 (very high) as per Creswell (2014). The overall mean score for the UWES-17 was 3.48 which is suggestive of neutrality or moderate levels of engagement. UWES-17 dedication had the highest mean score of 3.57, which is at the bottom end of the high range. The standard deviations received for vigour and absorption suggest consistency of response (<.80).

The analysis of factors promoting engagement delivered varying results, with mean scores ranging between 3.12 (Effective Communication and Flexitime) and 4.11 (Work-Life Balance). The findings are again suggestive of neutrality or moderate experiences, with the exception of work-life balance (4.11), employee wellbeing (3.58) and employee involvement (3.78), which all tend towards high

levels of agreement. However, of these three items, consistency of response was only evidenced for work-life balance (<.80).

Relationship between work engagement and engagement factors

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated to determine for relationships between the dimensions of engagement and the engagement factors explored in this study and, if so, whether these relationships were statistically and practically significant (Table 2).

Table 2: Pearson Product Movement Correlations: UWES-17 and engagement factors

| | Work-Life Balance | Employee Wellbeing | Leadership | Reward and Recognition | Employee Involvement | Effective Communication | Learning and Development | Flexitime | Flexiplace | Vigour | Dedication | Absorption |
|--------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|------------|------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|------------|--------|------------|------------|
| Work-Life Balance | - | ,439* | ,262 | ,263 | ,255 | ,286 | ,290 | ,331* | ,201 | ,246 | ,218 | ,159 |
| Employee Wellbeing | ,439* | - | ,696* | ,455* | ,504* | ,586** | ,600* | ,449* | ,233 | ,491* | ,407* | ,406* |
| Leadership | ,262 | ,696* | - | ,464* | ,503* | ,656** | ,594* | ,433* | ,188 | ,511* | ,437* | ,411* |
| Reward and Recognition | ,263 | ,455* | ,464* | - | ,426* | ,485** | ,453* | ,427* | ,125 | ,345* | ,332* | ,330* |
| Employee Involvement | ,255 | ,504* | ,503* | ,426* | - | ,672** | ,549* | ,474* | ,230 | ,490* | ,491* | ,427* |
| Effective Communication | ,286 | ,586* | ,656* | ,485* | ,672* | - | ,622* | ,505* | ,287 | ,561* | ,492* | ,448* |
| Learning and Development | ,290 | ,600* | ,594* | ,453* | ,549* | ,622** | - | ,502* | ,307* | ,517* | ,488* | ,427* |
| Flexitime | ,331* | ,449* | ,433* | ,427* | ,474* | ,505** | ,502* | - | ,287 | ,415* | ,383* | ,332* |
| Flexiplace | ,201 | ,233 | ,188 | ,125 | ,230 | ,287 | ,307* | ,287 | - | ,267* | ,180* | ,143* |
| Vigour | ,246 | ,491* | ,511* | ,345* | ,490* | ,561** | ,517** | ,415* | ,267 | - | ,745* | ,751* |
| Dedication | ,218 | ,407* | ,437* | ,332* | ,491* | ,492** | ,488* | ,383* | ,180 | ,745* | - | ,756* |
| Absorption | ,159 | ,406* | ,411* | ,330* | ,427* | ,448** | ,427* | ,332* | ,143 | ,751* | ,756* | - |

*Statistically significant

** Statistically and practically significant

For this analysis a correlation coefficient was deemed statistically significant at the 0.05 level for $n = 413$ if $|r| \geq .097$ and practically significant, regardless of the sample size, if $|r| \geq .300$, thus both statistically and practically significant if $|r| \geq .300$ (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2009). Overall, all the factors were found to be positively related to each other (minimum $r = .143$ and a maximum $r = .756$). Apart from FWA flexiplace, all the engagement factors demonstrate statistically and practically significant correlations with the UWES-17 scale dimensions, with FWA flexiplace demonstrating only statistical significance. This result suggests that flexibility in terms of time has more influence on work engagement than the place/location where work is done.

The positive statistically and practically significant relationships observed between engagement and the engagement factors heightens their importance as drivers of work engagement. What is interesting

to note is that statistically significant correlations emerged between most the engagement factors themselves, except for work-life balance and FWA flexiplace (no practical significance). This again suggests the limited influence of place as a driver of overall engagement.

Discussion of results

The primary objective of this study was to determine the levels of engagement of South African RAF employees as well as the influence of selected factors on their engagement. This included a focus on the potential role played by FWAs. The study was deemed important understanding that the public sector is an environment in which employees may experience challenges to their engagement, performance and ultimately service delivery. While some public sector employees may view their work as a calling and in this way demonstrate self-motivation and high levels of engagement (Ngwane & Dachapalli, 2022), this may not be the case for all employees.

The results of this study conducted among 413 employees of the South African RAF suggest that they experienced neutrality or moderate levels of engagement. While a slightly higher mean score was obtained for the dedication dimension, the overall findings indicate that there is room for improvement. It is accepted that engaged employees are vital in ensuring positive organisational outcomes with Reserva (2021) and Graca et al., (2019) highlighting better customer service, increased productivity and innovation, increased brand awareness, improved employee health and wellbeing, improved rate of retention and lower absenteeism as some of these outcomes. This makes it important for the RAF to pay more attention to increasing the energy levels, mental resilience, willingness to persist in the face of challenges, enthusiasm and task absorption of employees. While the Batho Pele principles were introduced in 1995 as a tool to transform public service delivery, this does not appear to have had the intended influence on work engagement (Emily & Muyengwa, 2021).

The study further revealed factors that could be leveraged to promote work engagement among RAF employees. While respondents largely indicated neutrality or moderate experiences for most factors, work-life balance, employee wellbeing and employee involvement attracted more positive responses, Allen et al. (2013) and Berg et al. (2014) raise the importance of work-life balance in an era in which technological advances, globalization, demographic and other changes exert a profound influence in the workplace. Further, Misselbrook (2014) highlights the integrated nature of wellbeing and engagement. The results have implications for policy development as there may be areas in which policy could be used to drive engagement, for example, through ensuring a greater focus on promoting work-life balance.

One of the objectives of this study was to determine whether there was a relationship between engagement and the factors seen to promote engagement. The results confirmed significant relationships between engagement and all factors considered in this study, as well as between the engagement factors themselves. Some of these relationships emerged as both statistically and

practically significant. This highlights the importance of developing an integrated strategy in promoting engagement.

One finding that emerges as noteworthy is that of flexiplace as linked to FWAs. It may be that where these employees worked was of lesser importance to them than when they worked, and this should be considered in the future development of hybrid and virtual work policies. The findings also support the contention of Allen et al., (2013) that employees are more concerned about when (working schedule) work is done than where (place) work is done. To this end Uglanova and Dettmers (2018) assert that planning and executing working hours (time) around individual needs and commitments is important to employees.

In general, these findings suggest that engagement at the RAF could be improved and that this could be done by finding ways to leverage the factors considered, these being work-life balance, employee wellbeing, leadership, reward and recognition, employee involvement, effective communication, learning and development, and FWAs. This leads to the managerial implications of this study.

6. Managerial Implications

The RAF, as a public sector entity, is mandated by law to ensure service delivery to citizens. The RAF was identified as experiencing many of the challenges faced by the South African public sector that could result from low levels of engagement. Empirical evidence links work engagement to higher levels of motivation and productivity (de Villiers et al., 2023) and engagement is driven by many factors.

This study determined that RAF employees largely demonstrated neutrality or moderate levels of engagement and that their engagement was linked to certain identified factors. While not all factors demonstrated practical significance, the findings nonetheless provide organisational leaders with a broad range of considerations in developing or enhancing a work engagement strategy. In developing a strategy, it would be important to firstly identify the relative importance of each factor for employees in order to focus on the areas that may bring about the most change. The strategy should also clearly link to organisational values and be supported by relevant policies and procedures, including a delineation of eligibility. Further recommendations include the following:

- Work-life balance can be promoted through identifying areas in which support can be offered to employees, either through the provision of services or time off for such as child or eldercare. FWAs, including remote and hybrid work could be offered if the work performed by employees allows for this. In addition, At the same time the employee's role in ensuring work-life balance should be emphasised. Further employees should be encouraged to utilise training and development opportunities to ensure updated and relevant job competencies.

- Many of the recommendations proposed for work-life balance would also aid in enhancing employee wellbeing. In addition, leaders play an important role in creating a positive work environment in which employees can thrive through being appropriate role models of wellbeing and including wellbeing in meeting agendas and regular communication. Employees should be encouraged to maintain their own wellbeing through living a healthy lifestyle, recognising when they may need support and dealing with stress.
- In terms of recognition and reward the South African public sector is recognised as paying better than the private sector. The median salary of a government employee is R46,000 per month as compared to R26,000 per month in the private sector (Jacobs, 2023). However, it is still important that employees perceive fairness and consistency in pay practices.
- Fostering a culture of employee involvement in which all employees are encouraged to share ideas, offer feedback and participate in decision-making processes can promote engagement. Managers and HR practitioners need to create a culture of inclusivity where employees are encouraged to share their ideas, offer feedback, and participate in decision-making processes which, in turn, will create a sense of belonging. This can be achieved via continuous improvement teams, quality circles, cross-boundary project teams, employee suggestion systems and effective and transparent communication and feedback systems

7. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

The main aim of this study was to determine the engagement of South African RAF employees and better understand the factors that promote their engagement, including the role played by FWAs. This entailed an examination of employee experiences of these phenomena, as well as probing for a relationship between the variables. Work engagement was determined using the UWES-17 and a scale was developed to measure the engagement factors.

While largely neutral / moderate experiences of work engagement and the engagement factors emerged, all the engagement factors considered were found to be positively related to engagement. The findings suggest that organisations need to identify, for their specific circumstances and irrespective of whether a public or private entity, the set of factors that is seen to most contribute to engagement at any given point in time. These determinants can then be used to develop an integrated engagement strategy. Within the public sector engaged employees are more likely to persist in challenging times and environments and this is important in bringing about positive change in achieving the public sector mandate.

Possible limitations of this study were considered, including the fact that the study represents the experiences of employees in one national public entity. This limits the generalisability of the findings. However, the RAF represents one of many government institutions in which engaged employees are expected to facilitate service delivery to citizens. As such, future studies could be expanded to include

more public entities. A further consideration in terms of generalizability was that most of the sample comprised employees who did not report to a leader. It is possible that their experiences may have differed from employees holding leadership positions. In addition, this was a quantitative study using an online survey to collect data. A qualitative study to determine the importance of the highlighted factors in enhancing engagement could be conducted and future research could also include a comparison of engagement factors in the private and public sector. It would also be valuable to determine whether there is a direct and predictive relationship between the identified factors and engagement..

While this study was conducted at the South African RAF, the findings and recommendations are sufficiently generic that they provide any organisation with a starting point in enhancing engagement. It also provides some insights into the role played by FWAs and this is an important consideration due to the global increase in the adoption of workplace FWAs.

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